

**TYPES OF EMOTION**  
**AND**  
**CLASSIC NARRATIVE MECHANISMS**

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**by**

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I come to this paper as a practising filmmaker, just as much as an academic; or should I say, theorist? My aim in theoretical exploration is, at the very least, as much to support, encourage and facilitate my activities as a filmmaker, as it is, hopefully, to make an academic contribution.

It took me reading Paul Schrader's *TRANSCENDENTAL STYLE IN FILM* to academically comprehend what I was intuitively trying to achieve as a filmmaker. In his book, Schrader sets out to study the unifying elements which tie together the work of such culturally diverse filmmakers as Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer, then, very successfully in my opinion, synthesises the common purpose like this (and I quote): 'The proper function of transcendental art is, therefore, to express the Holy itself (the transcendent), and not to express or illustrate holy feelings'.<sup>1</sup> (End of quote)

In my films, I continue to work with the consequences that this differentiation has on form. And in this paper that I present to you today, I wish to look, in particular, at basic narrative structure and emotions.

I believe that, the vast majority of contemporary narrative film accurately mirrors our western culture, in that, in its mechanisms and themes, it reflects an imbalance tilted strongly towards the masculine, the individual, the self-assertive, the materialistic and the conscious - at the expense of a healthy balance with the feminine, the community, the participatory in us, the spiritual and the subconscious. We need look no further than our emotions to see this. Though I am clearly interested in exploring a whole range of issues connected to this, this paper is more specifically concerned with asking: how contemporary classic narratives contributes to this imbalance, by appealing to only certain types of emotion, at the expense of other types of emotion.

Let me begin my exposition by side-stepping into the world of science and physiology.

One of the fathers of contemporary science, Sir Isaac Newton, was, of course, responsible for articulating one of our basic scientific theories - a theory, in fact, which many, particularly Eastern, philosophers could have told him about thousands of years earlier: namely that for every force, there is an equal and opposite force. Quantum Mechanics has, of course, extended Newtonian physics into the realm of not just opposing forces, but into non-matter and contradictory forces. It would seem that all palpable processes operate within laws of duality: opposing forces and contradictory forces, whose purpose is to strive for equilibrium and harmony.

It has taken, literally, thousands of experiments on animals for neurologists and physiologists to confirm that our autonomous nervous system, which is largely responsible for governing our emotions and emotional responses, also works on the basis of duality. Indeed, it is generally accepted in neurological circles that even the highest of intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> □ *Transcendental Style in Film*, Paul Schrader (Da Capo), p7.

activity has its roots in the most primitive of conflicting emotions. Let me quote the neuropathologist, Stanley Cobb<sup>2</sup>: 'The old brain' (he says) 'seems to have much to do with emotions and emotional expression... It seems to set the emotional background on which man functions intellectually... Men with understanding' (and here Cobb cites the likes of poets, leaders and physicians - dare I include filmmakers?) 'Men with understanding have always known that discriminative decisions were made on a background of emotion, that feelings drive the intellect, motivate it and mobilise the body into action'. (End of quote)

The autonomous nervous system works through two dualistically opposing mechanisms: the first is the sympathetic nervous system, the second being the parasympathetic nervous system. Both these systems, as I'm sure you'll be aware, use mainly hormones to activate bodily responses: in the case of the sympathetic, it is adrenaline, while in the case of the parasympathetic it is cholinergic secretion and insulin. It is the antagonistic interaction of the two systems that plays the crucial part in keeping our organism, including our emotions, in balance.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with adrenaline and what it does to us, and I'm sure we're all familiar with some of the things in our lives which evoke the feelings associated with adrenal release. For example: fear, anger, sexual attraction, jealousy, ambition. But what about the emotions one might associate with the parasympathetic hormonal release? I shall hopefully illustrate why these emotions might include: joy, rapture, sorrow, relief, sympathy, longing and love.

The sympathetic system, through the release of adrenaline, stimulates, for example, sweat glands to secrete, makes muscles and skin contract, dilates the pupils, introduces vasoconstriction of the blood vessels, quickens the heart rate, raises the blood sugar level, limits digestion and so on. Clearly the release of adrenaline relates to the body readying itself for self-protection and self-assertion. Similarly, as Arthur Koestler does in his book *THE ACT OF CREATION*, I associate the emotions I identified earlier with the sympathetico-adrenal, as being self-assertive emotions. Self-assertive, in the sense that these emotions are primarily concerned with self-protection and self-assertion of the individual body and ego.

The parasympathetic, through the cholinergic and the release of insulin, on the other hand, stimulates the constriction of the pupils, the secretion of tears, the secretion of saliva and the general activation of the stomach and bowels, slows the heart rate, reduces the blood sugar level and so on. In this case, the tendency is clearly to relax, to allow the body to engage in such activities as eating and sleeping. Sleeping, of course, is the ultimate in letting go of the body and mind to its fate. Like Koestler again, I clearly associate the emotions I connected to the parasympathetic insulin system, with emotions related to letting go of the ego, allowing the self to dissolve, so to speak, into the overall whole, thereby negating the self and the ego: this could, for example, be through rapture of wanting to be at one with a

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<sup>2</sup> □ Emotions and Clinical Medicine, Stanley Cobb (Norton), p87.

landscape, the love that sacrifices one's own individuality for someone else, or, for example, the feeling of profound sorrow for others. Koestler refers, as I shall, to these emotions as participatory.

When trying to picture which emotions are actually moved, I think of a long straight line: at one end, is the extreme release of adrenaly driven emotion - fear, anger, for example, which ready the being for self protection - while at the opposite end of the line, I see the extreme release of cholinergic emotions - rapture and affectionate love, for example, allowing the individual to lose their identity into a greater whole. At the sympathetic end, I see a fairground with a big rollercoaster, whipping screaming people down steep slopes, churning up their adrenaline lead emotions. At the other end, I see the shrine, where the relaxed individual in the parasympathetic extreme, sacrifices themselves to the whole, in rapture and love.

I am suggesting the classic narrative appeals to the former state, at the expense of the latter. In extreme cases, movies are no different to the rollercoaster, in that they are there to take you to the edge of your seat, make your heart pound, have you gripping your coat, ready to rush out of the cinema, should it all become too much. The prime purpose of these narratives is to thrill, to stir up our self-assertive emotions. A number of exploitative films come to mind - since we're in Texas, THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE, for example - and pulling back from the extreme, action-based sci-fi thrillers, like Scott's ALIEN, and psychological thrillers, like Hitchcock's VERTIGO; all have as key ingredients the explicit aim of evoking our fear and anxiety.

At the opposite end of the line, we have the meditative film, which in many ways I associate with replacing the shrine as the object of meditation. At this extreme we might see such films as Derek Jarman's BLUE or Michael Snow's WAVELENGTH. Pulling back from that extreme to more clearly narrative examples, Ozu's TOKYO STORY, Bresson's DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST, Chen Kaige's YELLOW EARTH and Victor Erices's QUINCE TREE SUN come to mind - all films whose very narrative and stylistic structures in themselves almost entirely evoke feelings of sorrow, longing and rapture.

As I pointed out earlier, I believe we live in a culture in which the self-assertive dominates. Perhaps it is hardly surprising, then, given these are the emotions with which we are consumed, that the classic narrative uses as its main motivating force, the psychology of the self-assertive. Robert Bresson, for example, has found this fact very restricting and insists on (and I quote)<sup>3</sup> 'no psychology of the kind which discovers only what *it* can explain'. (End of quote). In other words, for those filmmakers who want to explore other aspects of our emotional life, the classic narrative is going to prove limiting.

On the crudest of levels (and the following I think can be said of life itself), the self-assertive emotions are going to be engaged in narratives in which the identifying aim is the survival of

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<sup>3</sup> □ Notes on Cinematography, Robert Bresson (Urizon), p39.

a self-contained unit, such as a protagonist's life or freedom. This is not always in the literal sense, so long as it's the dissolution of an identifiable unit that is threatened. It often is, for example, the survival of ideology, as in Ford's *YOUNG MR LINCOLN*, or, indeed, the survival of a tradition, as in Flemming's *GONE WITH THE WIND*. In all these cases, I suggest that the audience empathises in the *first* instance with the aim, then indirectly with the protagonists stake in that aim.

The more we move away from addressing the most basic of self-assertive emotions, the more there is a need for the narrative to build up psychological relationships between the various elements - in particular between the protagonist and their aim. Though this psychological involvement satisfies our intellectual engagement in what is otherwise mainly emotionally driven, the key ingredient will usually always remain the question of whether (and I suppose also, when) the protagonist achieves their aim; for it is in *this* question our self-assertive emotions are ultimately engaged. Even a film as psychologically sophisticated as Woody Allen's *ANOTHER WOMAN* - which I consider to be a film whose narrative structure is close to tipping into the transcendental - nevertheless, first of all seeks to engage us in the question of whether the main protagonist will succeed in discovering and coming to terms with her other half, so to speak.

However, returning to the picture of the emotional equilibrium line, with the self-assertive emotions at one end, and the participatory emotions at the other, I would like to suggest that, while narratives that primarily address the self-assertive tend to have at the centre of their mechanism the question of whether (and sometime when); then, at the other end, narratives that primarily address our participatory emotions, tend to want to pose the question how (or, possibly, why) at the centre of their mechanism.

Let me briefly quote one of the greatest exponents of transcendental realism: namely Yasujiro Ozu. Ozu told Donald Richie in 1959 (and I quote)<sup>4</sup>: 'Pictures with obvious plots bore me now. Naturally, a film must have some kind of structure or else it is not a film, but I feel that a picture isn't good if it has too much drama or action... I want to portray a man's character by eliminating all the dramatic devices. I want people to *feel* what life is like without delineating all the dramatic ups and downs'. (End of quote). Ozu is also here emphasising the need to evoke the feeling itself, rather than to illustrate it.

If the transcendental narrative is not about engaging the emotions in some sort of rollercoaster ride - the self-assertive emotions, that is - then what is it going to do? A key feature of the transcendental narrative is the notion of the ever-present now; the absorption in the surface detail of actions and interactions, not because of a need to press on to the consequences of these actions, but because of the need to lose oneself in them and to contemplate them. In fact, contemplation is important in this self-dissolution. Clearly this process is going to engage the participatory emotions: but how? Here, once again, I must

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<sup>4</sup> □ The Later Films of Yasujiro Ozu, Donald Richie (Film Quarterly, 13, fall 1959), p.186.

return to Schrader, who quotes a classic Zen aphorism like this<sup>5</sup>: 'When I began to study Zen, mountains were mountains; when I thought I understood Zen, mountains were not mountains; but when I came to full knowledge of Zen, mountains were again mountains'. (End of quote).

Schrader takes this aphorism and develops a three stage structure for transcendental narrative: firstly, the presentation of the, at times, mundanely everyday; secondly, disparity, which takes the form of an 'actual or potential disunity between man and his environment, which culminates in a decisive action'<sup>6</sup>; thirdly, the stasis, which presents a 'frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity, but transcends it'.<sup>7</sup>

This could be Michel in Bresson's PICKPOCKET, who at the end, behind prison bars, transcends the stasis of his predicament; it could be the stasis of Ozu's Cudas, punctuating all his films; or the painter in Victor Erice's QUINCE TREE SUN who, at the end of a long

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<sup>5</sup>  Transcendental Style in Film, Paul Schrader (Da Capo), p. 38.

<sup>6</sup>  Transcendental Style in Film, Paul Schrader (Da Capo), p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>  Transcendental Style in Film, Paul Schrader (Da Capo), p. 49.

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Note: All italics within quotes are mine!

largely unsuccessful effort to try and paint the quince tree, himself becomes a model for a painter and falls into a very deep sleep; or, indeed, the blank sheet of paper that the old musician in Chen Kaige's LIFE ON A STRING finds in his master's instrument after breaking his 1000th string. All static predicaments which must be transcended.

You will note that I am deliberately avoiding straying into content, intellectual issues and ideology; for, as I would like to remind you at this stage, my simplified model is concerned with identifying two broad strands of emotion and their relation to basic narrative mechanisms. Neither am I suggesting that any particular film is either one or the other, in terms of its emotional realism; some psychologically realist work include moments of the transcendental, as do some transcendentally realist films include psychologically motivated narrative elements. What I am suggesting, however, is that the overall body of work produced by the Hollywood dominated narrative tradition, shows an unhealthily exclusive interest in our self-assertive emotions, giving the audience at large little insight into narratives that might appeal to the audience's participatory emotions.

The consequence of this, I feel, is, in part, contributing to the ever increasing need for sexually explicit and violent films, with narrative themes operating beyond the extremes of human experience. As the audiences ever-hardening emotional reactions demand more explicit and titillating imagery to arouse the self-assertive emotions, so we lose sight of our emotional 'other half'. This neglect of the 'other half' in popular cinema, fuels the complete dominance of the masculine over the feminine, the individual over the community, the violent over the gentle and sex over love.

It is all very well to want to titillate and arouse the self-assertive in us - we who are parents all, I imagine, enjoy taking the kids to the fairground for a rollercoaster ride - but somehow I can't help feeling that art - and film included - must never lose sight of the fact that it has an important role to play as a means for us to transcend being individual human beings, at times bogged down by the pain of living, or the sheer, for some people, mundaneness of it all. Indeed, art and story telling has, throughout the ages, provided the predominant means by which we sought to understand our place in a larger community, in a broader history and in an infinite universe. And for those millions of people whose only exposure to art is the TV screen and the movie screen, should not film play its part in that ongoing role?

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